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# THE FORGOTTEN FOLK

BY JOHN CORBIN

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IN their widely heralded debate, Governor Allen asked Samuel Gompers a direct and simple question—a question which has been uppermost of late in the minds of many, and which had indeed been announced as the subject of debate. When a conflict between labor and capital halts the production or distribution of the necessities of life, thus threatening the public peace or impairing the public health, “has the public any rights in such a controversy—or is it a private war between capital and labor?” Mr. Gompers hesitated and evaded, but from various parts of the hall the challenge rang out that he answer. At last he said, “An innocent child can ask more questions than his father——” With that his burly partisans broke into a roar of approving laughter. For the moment the Old Fox of the Federation triumphed. He could not, however maintain the air of his triumph. Thereafter his remarks came haltingly—were at best disjointed, at worst keen personal digs and broad insinuations. Eventually, in a surprising burst of frankness, he spoke apologetically of the fact that his remarks had become “desultory.” And all the time he bore in his hand the plain, blunt question, which Governor Allen had written out for him.

The question referred, of course, to the fact that when the soft coal miners quit work during the bitterest cold of the winter of 1919-1920, Governor Allen, to the extreme disgust of organized labor, broke the strike, in so far as it affected Kansas, by calling out a force of young men who mined coal to warm the shivering public and save the lives of hospital patients. It referred also to the new Industrial Relations Court, likewise anathema to labor, by which Kansas hopes to avert all conflicts that threaten to shut down basic industries and tie up public utilities. But there were some in the audience who saw in the situation

a still deeper question. Just what is "the public" whose rights were supposedly in debate? Labor and capital, capital and labor—since the industrial revolution gave every element in life new values and relations, these have been the substance of all thinking, economic and social. We know very well what they are. But only on rare occasions, after they have created conditions that are intolerable, have we remarked, with a vague impatience, that after all the public has *some* rights. . . . When peace was restored, though only for the moment, we quickly forgot about that. Statesmen and labor leaders, professors of economics and heads of bureaus in Washington, went right along thinking and writing only of labor and capital, capital and labor.

Is the public a thing that includes both labor and capital—the nation, in short? Or is it some *tertium quid*, vaguely conceived and as yet undefined? Mr. Gompers himself is apparently in doubt, and his doubt has rather the air of haunting him. A week after his breakdown into the "desultory," he gave out a written statement which purported to answer Governor Allen's question. There is no public, he said, which is wholly separate and apart from employers and employees. The "real public" includes all union men and women and is in fact "fully one-fourth union," while "Governor Allen's public" is, as it seemed to Mr. Gompers, "for the most part an employing and non-union public." Thus what is called "public welfare" is only "an abstraction." As the result of a week's cogitation, we were back on the familiar ground—labor and capital, capital and labor. . . . Thus, refreshed like Antaeus with a fall to his mother earth, Mr. Gompers came out roundly with the ancient doctrine. The strike is "the only means by which the laborer can compel consideration of his just demands." "The public has no rights which are superior to the toiler's right to defend himself against oppression." If all this means anything it means, first, that there is no such thing as the public and, second, that when it is set upon by labor—pummeled and mauled, frozen and starved—it has no rights.

If any one of us found a schoolboy attempting to solve a problem of three factors by reckoning with only two of them, we should give him up as a hopeless numskull; yet this is precisely what we have all been doing with the great

problem in which we live and move and have our being—such as our being nowadays is. Governor Allen, it is true, has stood forth boldly as champion of the so-called public, and in doing so has gained a nationwide reputation.

But while declaring certain obvious rights, he has not defined the third factor nor attempted to fix its interrelationships with the other two. Nor have our publicists attempted the inquiry; even Mr. Gompers' doubly dramatic breakdown elicited from them only hoary platitudes and the vaguest and most helpless generalizations. Like the Old Fox himself they became desultory.

Something of vagueness, of self contradiction, inheres in this term, "the public." Labor and capital are definite and salient factors, mutually exclusive and dramatically arrayed. They seize the eye, arrest the attention, stimulate the constructive reason. The so-called public is not properly a factor at all. As Mr. Gompers pointed out, it includes both labor and capital. That is an idea which he doubtless gleaned from the well-meaning advocates of industrial harmony, who never weary of enlarging upon it with the air of bestowing a thought of sovereign worth. They exhort labor to modify its destructive violence, arguing that, as it is itself a part of "the public," it suffers from its own wastefulness. Labor laughs in its sleeve, no doubt, for it knows—none better—that only through organized striving, incessant warfare, has it raised itself, in the course of a century, out of defenseless oppression into a position of commanding might, before which today the whole world trembles. Likewise these good folk counsel capital to placate labor with liberal doles—because capital also profits in the general weal. At this the hard-headed capitalist smiles sardonically. By holding labor in check—fighting bitterly when he can and conceding graciously what he must—he has massed the wealth of the nation compactly until, through his ever expanding corporations, he wields a princely power. He knows too well that the moment he relaxes his readiness to fight labor the regime of capitalism is ended. Meantime the great majority of the people, who are neither hand laborers nor capitalists, receive no soothing word, no precious thought. Through the century and a half of the Industrial Revolution, they have remained an inchoate mass, a nebulous and whirling

chaos which is torn unresisting while new worlds of might are born.

This fallacy of confusing a part with the whole crops up wherever people think and write—or write without thinking—of our economic and social problems. Examples might be cited indefinitely: a few must suffice. In an article written during the first year of the war, the Chairman of the United States Steel Corporation upbraided our nation as “a great undisciplined, unruly, envious and bickering family” and made a stirring call for “the co-operation of citizen with citizen, class with class.” That was the only means by which our people could “act with singleness or loftiness of purpose, whether in a great emergency or in the continuous daily development of their national welfare”—and help win the war. It was an inspiring call, and Judge Gary sounded it in the name of “clear thinking”—to the lack of which he attributed our failure to act “with singleness and loftiness of purpose.” But in what followed it was amply evident that, if thinking clearly, he was thinking of only two classes. “A banker may not be fit to operate a blacksmith shop, nor a blacksmith fit to manage a bank.” What he wanted was to have Capital freed from the “bickering” of Labor, and to this end he offered Labor, in lieu of arbitrary advances gained by wasteful strikes, “greater safety, shorter hours, more continuous employment and a share in the increased profits”—the usual doles. No shadow of a thought, clear or muddled, was given to those laboring folk who are not organized and who never strike.

Our most liberal and disinterested organs of opinion have an outlook as narrow and confined. In an article written after the war *The Villager* said: “For the next stretch of the road anyway, labor is to be the leader of the tandem industrial team; capital has been moved back to the shafts.” As to the salaried brain worker, we are told nothing. Is he the middle horse in a tandem team of three, a passenger in the cart—or only dirt in the roadway? The transformation of leader to wheelhorse, it appears, is to result in “a brake on industrial initiative”—a slowing down of production; but the fact that this would still further impoverish men living on fixed salaries is apparently not worth considering.

Whenever “the public” is officially represented in

efforts at industrial harmony the situation becomes salient, dramatic. The most recent instance was the first Industrial Conference of October, 1919. As constituted by President Wilson, it contained the usual three groups. Labor was represented by the high officials of the American Federation and of the great Railway brotherhoods, under the leadership of Samuel Gompers. Capital was represented by the national Chamber of Commerce and the national Investment Bankers' Association. As the result of some unimaginable mental acrobatics, three representatives from national farmers' organizations were also included as capitalists. The "public" group represented no organization, exhibiting the usual nationwide straddle. At one end were Judge Gary, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Bernard M. Baruch—the last a sensationally successful Wall Street operator. At the other end were John Spargo and Charles Edward Russell, leaders of the Socialist Party and lifelong champions of Karl Marx. Somewhere between were Charles W. Eliot, long president of one of our richest educational corporations, and Bert M. Jewell, President of the Railway Employees Department of the American Federation of Labor. This motley assemblage had much ado to agree among themselves; and they had the still stiffer task of calling down the dove of peace upon the other two groups.

The inevitable happened—*c'est son metier!* Much was said of "collective bargaining"—but the conference proved unable even to define it. Judge Gary was derided in his capacity as a representative of the public and ultimately quit the conference in disgust. At the first opportunity the labor group fell upon the capitalists in the old familiar manner, evading every clear issue and endeavoring to twist the Conference, which was to have brought the industrial millennium, into an engine for winning a single strike—the steel strike, otherwise hopelessly lost. Failing in this, Samuel Gompers walked out with his cohorts, threatening to join up with the farmers—except of course the three "capitalists" present—and work universal destruction. "The time will come when they will be glad enough to bargain collectively with labor!" And so the dove of peace moulted one more feather.

One element of the true public was unrepresented in the Conference: the men who do not labor with their hands

and do not control capital—the highly trained, hard-working employees of business houses, of industrial, financial and educational corporations. But though unrepresented, it cannot be said that they were conspicuous by their absence! You may search the world in vain for any gathering in which their rights are presented, for any clear definition of them as a class, or for any statement of their present wrongs and their legitimate aims. Capital is organized, class-conscious—and so manages to care for its own. Labor is organized, class-conscious; it takes its own abundantly. But the great range of folk in between have no organization, no sense of their collective interests, of their relation to the state as a whole. And so they are forgotten. If anyone bears them in mind it is the socialists; but they do not regard them as men and brothers. For reasons of their own they call them bourgeois, and mark them down for a still more thorough destruction.

The Socialists are not far from having their way. During the war, hand laborers have seen to it that their wages have risen in proportion to the rise of prices. Some of them are still buying diamonds and furs, talking-machines, pianos, automobiles. "Labor has been a movement," as *The Villager* remarks, "and you do not solve movements; you make way for them." Capital is likewise a movement, sweeping across the continent and everywhere creating wealth and a more abundant life. In spite of increased labor cost, income tax and excess profit tax, the rich are still the rich. The war has obliterated untold billions of the world's wealth; yet never in times of fat prosperity have luxuries been more eagerly consumed. But not by the salaried brain worker! He is still wearing the clothes he bought in 1914. His wife is doing housework, and his children, if he has any, are giving up the hope of advanced schooling and college. As far as the war has been paid for, it is the forgotten man mainly who has paid for it—paid for it in money, in free and vigorous living, in efficiency as a member of the nation. Even before the war, statistics showed that the brain workers were not increasing in proportion to the other classes. Today they must certainly be declining markedly, in numbers as in distinction and power.

Yet the forgotten man is the mind of the nation, if a nation in which such things happen can be said to have a

mind. He is the underpaid clerk and cashier, the underpaid buyer and salesman, the underpaid manager, laboratory worker, lawyer, doctor, clergyman, professor.

When the belly and the members are at war, the whole body suffers. There is only one force that can control the strife. It is the brain. But what if the brain become anemic, atrophied?

It would be interesting to know why the American mind has so persistently—so obstinately, as it seems—refused to define, to visualize, this *tertium quid*. One conjecture suggests itself. Deep in the mental life of our people is the dogma that in America there are no classes; deep in the heart of our democracy is an abhorrence of social ticketing. We can talk of labor and capital—even think of them, and in some respects think profoundly, constructively—without invoking the idea of invidious discrimination.

But the only name we have for the intermediate folk is the middle class, and that is abhorrent to all—especially to the middle class! Does the subconscious mind practice a Freudian evasion? Is the middle class forgotten because it wills to forget itself? Labor and capital live in separate spheres. No question of social distinction arises; their struggle is purely economic. The brain worker rubs elbows everywhere. The clerk knows that he is inferior to the highly skilled and prosperous mechanic out in the factory, yet cherishes his white collar though it ruin him, for it means that his standing is that of an educated man.

The professional gentleman, whose whole soul tells him that he is superior to the mere wielder of moneybags, feels none the less a very definite awe before him. Labor is a great economic and political power. Wealth is our only nobility. But what distinction have the Forgotten Folk with which to feed their inward pride?

It is not merely in America that the brain-working class lies in abeyance. The phenomenon is familiar in every modern country. It is only here, however, that there is a national fiction, an ingrained tradition, that men are born equal and that the fostering of class interest is immoral. All this, at least, has been.

Of late certain forces have gained head in the world that cannot be evaded by subliminal dodging, that resist



even the dogmas of the Declaration of Independence.

Two incidents mark the epoch. A college professor who objected that the plumber was charging more than he himself was paid received this airy rejoinder: "Yes, but I'm not a professor!" That was taken as a jest, however sorry; for the distinguished educator knew that some time and somehow he would be provided for—and besides, are not all Americans equal? But when the unions of railway hands held up supplies this same professor donned overalls and helped to break the strike. The health of his wife and the lives of his children were threatened, together with his tradition of national order and efficiency, solidarity and service. It took the strike in basic industries, on national arteries, to rouse the middle class. As long as labor and capital confined their "bickering" to scattered industries, the war was thought to be "private"; the "public," which has always been recognized as holding the balance of power, preserved an attitude of detachment, scarcely aware that it had a stake in the outcome and always ready to throw its sympathy to the supposed under dog of labor. An arrogant and exacting plumber, casually encountered, was a joke. But a national strike meant business. Of late years there are few labor wars that remain "private." The basic industries and the systems of transportation are rapidly tending toward organization on a nationwide scale, both as regards labor and as regards capital. Many a strike threatens the very life blood of the nation. In the few years since peace began to rage among us, the sheer might of economic pressure has forced "the public," throughout the civilized world, to a sense of its rights—and its power. The general strike in Winnipeg, the transportation strike in England, the coal strike as it affected Kansas, the general strike in Denmark, the "outlaw" railway strike and the dock strike in the port of New York, each in its own way and quite independently, called forth a new and portentous force to oppose it. The right to strike selfishly, recklessly, which labor has always asserted and which Mr. Gompers proclaims, has evoked a giant enemy before which in every contest labor has crumbled. The Forgotten Folk are remembering themselves—are on the verge of becoming class-conscious. When the national welfare is at stake, there is no such thing as

a "scab." One sentence runs through a million minds: As long as the hand worker asserts the right to strike in basic industries and public utilities, the brain worker will assert the equal right to break that strike.

Let no one beguile himself with the fancy that this war is won. As yet we have had only a few skirmishes at the outposts. At the latest convention of the American Federation of Labor, at Montreal, a large majority voted in favor of government ownership and democratic control of railways, mines, and whatever they choose to put their hands to. It is "the principle of the Plumb Plan" applied to all possible basic industries and public utilities—in a word Syndicalism, or at best Guild Socialism. This was not the work of vague visionaries and irresponsible agitators. It was largely the work of upstanding craftsmen and mechanics, men of American birth and traditions, highly paid, proudly class-conscious and with millions in their Federation treasuries. They are far more deeply versed in the literature of economic and social advance than a vast majority of us others who, though we have minds educated and trained, have been too steeped in economic ignorance and political dogma to realize what is up in the world and doing. The federated American laborers know—none better—that government ownership and "democratic" control mean waste of capital and inefficient service. Why does not this deter them? Because Syndicalism has honeycombed the Federation, with its promise of a larger life and a more exalted power for the worker.

We are entering the climax of an epoch. Early in the nineteenth century the era of small and local units in business gave birth to small and local trade and crafts unions. As business tended to consolidate on a national basis, the scattered trade and crafts unions likewise drew together in a national Federation of Labor; but the component units were still a multiplicity of trade and craft unions—skilled workers. Today the Syndicalists, "boring from within" the Federation, are building up a new type of organization, potentially of far greater power. The basic unit of organized labor is to be not the craft but the industry as a whole—unskilled workers included with the skilled. Labor in the steel trade, the coal mines, the railways—in every basic industry and public utility—is to be organized

as a nation-wide unit, obedient to command. The ultimate aim, as syndicalist leaders have proclaimed, is a nation-wide struggle for mastery between all labor and all capital. At Montreal, Mr. Gompers resisted the radicals to the last ditch. At heart he and his dwindling faction believe in the skilled worker and distrust the unskilled; in political theory they are individualists, not socialists; in economic theory they are capitalists, not syndicalists, national guildsmen or Plumb Planners. But the mass of the once conservative Federation has turned decisively against them.

That is why, in all his public utterances, the naturally clear mind of Samuel Gompers seems muddled. He is a patriotic and far-seeing American. He knows the middle class, its rights and its potential strength, far better than "the public" knows it, and being sincerely devoted to the cause of labor he undoubtedly fears its awakening. His repeated praise of industrial peace, of enhanced production, is no doubt quite genuine. If he declares the eternal sanctity of the strike and denounces all effort to submit industrial differences to an appropriate court, it is mainly because to do otherwise is to outrage the majority of his followers who are preparing for the ultimate duel, and thus to forfeit his lifelong leadership in the Federation. The situation is complicated but the upshot is obvious—that the hand of labor is against both capital and "the public." What else can this mean but continued and ever widening war?

As this warfare progresses, a definite middle class is emerging from the inchoate public—becoming slowly but steadily class-conscious. With each succeeding strike it is consolidating its forces. England has already a nationwide Middle-Class Union, and there will soon be one here. Not only labor but "the public" stand at the crossways, confronting a momentous decision. In the inevitable process of achieving class consciousness, what will happen to the middle-class mind, the middle-class soul? Will it preserve its traditional sense of national order and efficiency, of social solidarity and service? Or will it become self-centered—merely one more faction in the national bickering?

There is a dangerous element in the situation. The middle-class has, and presently it will cherish, a wrong as deep as the wrong which, over a century ago, gave origin and impetus to the labor unions. While labor and

capital float high on the tide of war-made prosperity, the salaried folk are submerged. Their grievances in the matter of rent, clothing and food are familiar—the tragedy of “the new poor.” This wrong affords the definite incentive to organized resistance. But underlying it is a moral wrong which, consciously or unconsciously, is raising the irresistible groundswell of rebellion. Untold millions of Americans are totally unable to educate their children as they themselves were educated, unable to equip them for the work of their kind in the world. Other millions have been prevented by poverty from having children at all. For the present this deeper cause is scarcely realized; no voice of protest is raised. But when the financial cause is re-enforced and inspired by a full sense of the moral issue, the patriotic issue, we shall have material for strife of the bitterest.

These are the more obvious facts in the problem of the Forgotten Folk; in its subtler relations it ramifies every bypath of the complicated modern state. If met and solved in the spirit of free institutions, the solution should bring new health and vigor to all members of the economic body. As the middle class suffers, the mind of the nation becomes anemic and shrivels; as the middle class flourishes so does the nation as a whole. But with the opportunity is a great danger. . . .

One fact is paramount. Above the belly and the members is the brain—and that, after all, is the seat of intelligence and of whatever human nature can boast in altruism.

JOHN CORBIN.